

Francis Alÿs: *Fabiola*

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Francis Alÿs: Fabiola, installation view, Dia at the Hispanic Society of America, New York, September 20, 2007–April 6, 2008; photo: Cathy Carver

back cover:

Unknown artist, *Fabiola*, n.d.; photo: Francesca Esmay, courtesy Francis Alÿs.

All the works on view in this gallery depict the same subject. Contrary to expectation, they belong to a single collection, and what makes this collection remarkable is its exclusive focus on that singular subject: a fourth-century Christian saint known as Fabiola, who is portrayed, in accordance with her canonical iconography, as a young woman in profile, facing left, wearing a crimson veil. The prototype from which virtually every work derives is a lost painting by a late-nineteenth-century French academician named Jean-Jacques Henner.¹ In its iconography, style, and composition, Henner's portrait was unexceptional, even quite conventional; nonetheless, his delicate rendering of her features was deceptively subtle and, as evidenced by the examples in this gallery, not easily replicated. The original is long lost, so the immediate model for these works must have been a reproduction, perhaps an illustration in a book or a magazine, perhaps a picture postcard or an engraved print.²

Although many thousands of mechanically reproduced images of this young woman exist, every object included here has been made by hand.³ The initial impression of homogeneity is dispelled, for the nearly three hundred objects quickly distinguish themselves from one another; within the collection's unusually narrow compass there is an enormous range. The spectrum of mediums is immediately striking: oil paint, gouache, embroidery, enamel, plaster, ceramic, and, in one particularly memorable instance, seeds and beans. There is also a surprising breadth in the makers' technical skills. Only a few demonstrate the proficiency expected of a professional artist; most must have been made by amateurs. Yet, it's often precisely the technical limitations that make a particular rendering compelling.

Further differences may be attributed to the fact that, whether consciously or not, some of these painters interjected features belonging to another model, sometimes known personally to the maker, more often probably idealized or imaginary.

Little noted in the ecclesiastical pantheon for centuries after her canonization in AD 537, Fabiola finally escaped from obscurity on the wave of the Catholic revival that swept late-nineteenth-century Europe. According to her first advocate, the early church father Saint Jerome, she left an abusive husband and remarried, only to be widowed some years later. After converting to Christianity and making public penance for the sin of divorce, she then devoted the remainder of her life (and fortune) to charitable work, reputedly founding the first hospital for the poor and needy on the outskirts of Rome in the late fourth century. Fabiola's rise to cult status began in the 1850s, when a racier version of her story was published in the guise of a romantic historical novel of the kind popularized by Sir Walter Scott. Written by Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, a British prelate and leading pillar of the Catholic revival, *Fabiola, or the Church of the Catacombs* became a best seller, and has since been read by generations of impressionable young minds.⁴

Revered as the protector of abused women, Fabiola is also extolled as the patron of nurses; her popular veneration may therefore owe much to the concurrent growth of the modern nursing profession through the efforts and example of Florence Nightingale. Yet, though unquestionably esteemed, especially among women, Fabiola does not seem to have become the object of an official or public worship expressed in the form of dedicated sites and shrines; so, while

widespread, devotion to her has remained at the level of personal supplication. Henner's economical depiction was never supplemented by narrative variants, such as scenes of her nursing the infirm. His thus-definitive rendering is, moreover, infused with a degree of naturalism and animation that makes her seem approachable and somehow contemporary—even though she undoubtedly remains a religious icon. Given that her signature features—a simple red cloak and a limpid profile—are so basic, artists have stuck closely to his canonical portrayal to ensure that those seeking her sanctity could instantly recognize her. Traces of subjective or expressive distortion in painted variants are likely more inadvertent than intentional.

From its first public showing, copies of Henner's image rapidly proliferated in print media, though for a different—mass—market. Far into the second half of the twentieth century, popular interest in *Fabiola* continued to require inexpensive reproductions.⁵ Yet, as attested by the collection on view, amassed from cities throughout western Europe and Latin America, hand-painted versions by both professional and amateur artists also continued to multiply and still find a ready audience. While most of the examples shown here could be described as copies after an old master painting, it is unlikely that they were undertaken for the usual pedagogical reasons: both the rudimentary levels of technical proficiency and the obscurity into which Henner's reputation has fallen argue against that hypothesis. If the striking homogeneity of the collection depends on its single subject, the collection's identity and character rely on not simply the handwrought but the utilitarian—these works were produced for functional, rather than purely aesthetic, ends. Indeed,

the use of unconventional mediums, plus the unusually broad range of supports (which includes even glass and velvet), blur conventional distinctions between artisanal or handcrafted artifacts and traditional fine-art objects.

Over the past four decades, interventions by contemporary artists in museums of all types have become a familiar aesthetic strategy; indeed, so routine has institutional critique become that it is now codified as a historical category of artistic practice. Such interventions typically probe the power relations, ideologies, and disciplinary structures of museums. Originating in the late sixties in the radical site-specific and site-related works of Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, and Marcel Broodthaers, this genealogy provides a filter for viewing the *Fabiola* collection in LACMA's galleries.

From the first tentative discussions concerning the exhibition of this collection, the owner placed certain restrictions on its presentation. LACMA is an encyclopedic museum; its globe-spanning collections range from antiquity to the present day, and include both fine and decorative arts. For this presentation of the *Fabiola* collection, the owner required a location adjacent to galleries housing the European old masters collection. Sequestered in a room whose decor, while tailored to the needs of this display, still resembles that of its neighbors, the collection is hung according to conventions established by the nineteenth-century academic salon; the paintings are closely aligned in rows, with the objects displayed nearby in a period-style vitrine.

Such an installation prompts the kinds of aesthetic and historical questions that are typically addressed to old master artworks, questions pertaining to

authorship, iconography, function, originality, and uniqueness. However, given the degraded condition of many of these artifacts, matters of connoisseurship become subsumed to other issues. Although some of the works in this collection appear to have a venerable patina, close inspection reveals that most were made in the later part of the last century. On occasion, artificial aging has been reinforced by the accidents of history. Shorn of the frames that once would have enhanced and protected them, many bear abraded edges or are otherwise damaged. None, however, reveal the type of restoration customarily accorded to artworks that are highly valued, whether for financial or sentimental reasons. And, tellingly, no attempt has been made by their current owner to redeem their fall from grace by disguising the signs that almost all were found in flea markets and similar haunts: their lowly status is incontestable. Compared with the exhibits in adjacent galleries, they have scant pedigrees and slim provenances, yet in retrieving and contextualizing them in this fashion, their owner has not only restored them to life but offered them multiple new identities.⁶

In the eyes of its creator and owner, artist Francis Alÿs, this collection invites investigation as a collection, in and of itself. Although he has developed a conceptually based practice, Alÿs plays down the claim that the acquisition and presentation of his collection constitute a work in his own oeuvre. Instead, he emphasizes the process, the way in which the open-ended activity of amassing and shaping his collection has devolved into a mode of inquiry or investigation.

In the mid-1990s, several years after he relocated to Mexico City and abandoned his vocation as an architect, Alÿs decided to make an art collection for

himself. As a young artist with limited resources, he had developed a fascination with various forms of artisanal production and an interest in the structure and role of the art market as it impacts economies of production.⁷ He therefore resolved to build a collection from hand-painted copies of masterpieces of Western art, which he hoped to find in the flea markets and antique stores he loved to frequent. He soon discovered, however, that in lieu of the journeyman renderings of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, Leonardo's *Last Supper*, Jean-François Millet's *Angelus*, and like works that he assumed copyists would favor, he confronted pictures of a young female saint whom he quickly learned was Fabiola. Most of his early acquisitions were made serendipitously, on wanderings through places as far-flung as Maastricht and Mexico City; more recently colleagues and acquaintances have supplemented his finds with theirs. Beginning as a modest, almost casual quest, Alÿs's deliberately low-key venture has evolved in unanticipated ways. Far from terminating when it reached the bounds of a domestically scaled collection, it is open-ended: there is no inevitable closure.

With the copy as its founding precept, Alÿs's collection privileges the replica over the original, the anonymous over the renowned, the artisan or amateur over the professional, and the lowly or kitsch over the precious. Veneration of unknown artisans is fully in keeping with his practice, for he has long worked with craftsmen of various kinds, sometimes collaboratively, pooling and exchanging skills as needed. Similarly, his redirection of the collection into an investigatory venture dovetails with his willingness to allow any project and its governing logic to move in directions he could not have fully foreseen at its start. Also consistent with his

practice is the fact that this project's underlying ethic downplays a signature statement in favor of communal or collective discourse. Where it differs from many of his other works, such as *Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political and Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic* (2004), shown recently in LACMA's Latin American galleries, is that they normally evolve in relation to a specific context or venue, and are dispersed afterward.⁸

By eschewing conventional white galleries that are the norm for the display of modernist and contemporary artworks and the raw warehouse spaces generally utilized for post-1960s installation art as possible sites for display, Alÿs has sought to historicize his collection's reception. In so doing, he makes an interpretive maneuver designed, above all, to center attention back on the *image* of Fabiola, that is, on the elusive prototype somehow ever present among the myriad approximations. Over the past fifteen years, he has asked himself repeatedly: "Why that image in particular? What gives it that power to resist . . . first, mechanical reproduction and, now, digital reproduction? Is the ritual, the *act* of painting, a requisite for conferring on the image its aura? What is it that made it become an icon, an object beyond any consideration of taste? How has it served as a reminder of the existence of a completely parallel and separate art scene from, say, 'ours,' one with its own references and obsessions?"⁹ The shards of a resilient, but nonetheless threatened, cultural practice, Alÿs's flea-market finds exemplify resistance to a rapidly changing technological world. A trace of melancholy consequently permeates many viewers' initial impressions of wonder.

—Lynne Cooke, Curator, Dia Art Foundation

Notes

1. Henner's depiction had its visual sources in the portraiture of secular subjects that the Bellinis and other Venetian artists introduced in the sixteenth century. Given that profile portraiture was linked to classical as distinct from Christian traditions of representation, his iconography could be said to meld intimations of her patrician background with the Christian virtues she acquired through her penance, charitable deeds, and piety.
2. Evidence suggesting that the paintings were copied from reproductions of the lost originals is found, for example, in the variations in size, the reversal of the motif so that Fabiola faces right (in several instances), and the substitution of the tonally similar green for the customary red in the cloak. Some of the Fabiola paintings may also have come from second-generation images, that is, from postcards made of a copy by another artist rather than from a reproduction of Henner's original.
3. Given these parameters, both printed reproductions and "fakes" (those made specifically to pique Francis Alÿs's interest) are rigorously excluded from the collection. Among objets d'art, such as jewelry and dishes, Alÿs distinguishes those commercially manufactured from those that require the intervention of an individual hand, such as enameled objects.
4. Namesake to many women in Mexico and Belgium, including the dowager queen, Fabiola was later the subject of a film directed by Alessandro Blasetti, released in 1949, based on Cardinal Wiseman's novel. See also Susan Laningham, "Painting Fabiola: The Hagiographer as Literary Artist," in *Francis Alÿs: Fabiola, An Investigation*, 23–29.
5. A series of 254 Clásicos de Lujo matchbook covers, sold throughout Mexico in the mid-twentieth century, featured renowned old master paintings. The first in the series (preceding works by Velázquez, Titian, et al.), was devoted to Henner's *Fabiola*.
6. "Flea markets are black holes of the signified," Cuauhtémoc Medina argues eloquently, "places where objects lose their inherited meanings that gave them a sense of belonging, where they acquire new meanings as they pass to other hands." Medina, "Fabiola: Who [doesn't] know[s] her?" in *Fabiola: Una investigación*, 11.
7. See Olivier Debroise, "Entry and Exit: A New Internalization of Mexican Art, 1987–1992," in *La Era de la Discrepancia: Arte y cultura visual en México/The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1968–1997*, ed. Debroise (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006), 338–47.
8. This collection was exhibited from September 2007 to April 2008, for the first time as a collection in a museum, at the Hispanic Society of America in New York under the auspices of Dia Art Foundation. In September–October 1994 twenty-eight examples were shown in a solo exhibition by Francis Alÿs, *Fabiola*, Curare, Mexico City; in 1997 he showed approximately sixty in a group show, *Antechambres*, at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; the same sixty were then supposed to have been shown in the 2nd Biennial of Saaremaa, Estonia, in 1997. For a complete account of the Estonian exhibition, see Cooke, "Francis Alÿs: Instigator/Investigator," in *Francis Alÿs: Fabiola, An Investigation*, 63, n. 7.
9. Alÿs, email message to the author, July 17, 2007.

Francis Alÿs was born in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1959. He studied architecture at the Institut d'Architecture de Tournai, Belgium, and the Istituto di Architettura di Venezia, Italy. He began to work as an artist in 1990 after moving to Mexico City and had his first one-person exhibition there in 1991. Major exhibitions of his work have been presented at such venues as Art Angel, London (2005); Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany (2004); and the Musée d'art contemporain, Avignon, France (2004). He participated in the Venice Biennial in 2007 and 2001 and the Carnegie International in 2004. Alÿs lives and works in Mexico City.

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